On the “What as Why” Phenomenon in Japanese and Turkish

In quite a few languages, the wh-phrase corresponding to English ‘what’ can be used to ask for a reason, in addition to a canonical reason wh-phrase corresponding to English ‘why’: Japanese and Turkish are, among other languages, mainly considered in this paper. It has been reported that reason WHAT-words have more restrictions than WHY-words (e.g., Kurafuji 1996). Thus, the goal of this paper is, arguing (1a-b), to provide a unified analysis for the reason WHAT-words in the two languages. Also, it is shown that (1c) is obtained as a consequence of our analysis.

(1) a. The reason WHAT-words have ordering restriction that is related to their Foc(us)-F(eature).
   b. The reason WHAT-words should be treated as non-D-linked wh-phrases.
   c. The reason WHAT-words are base-generated lower than the NegP; the WHY-words are higher than the NegP.

The relevant examples are in (2). There, Japanese nani-o ‘what-Acc’ and Turkish ne ‘what’ function as a reason wh-phrase, just like the canonical reason wh-phrase in these language naze ‘why’ and neden ‘why’, respectively.

(2) a. Japanese karera-wa nani-o/naze sawaide-i-ru no.
   b. Turkish Ne/Neden ağıyorsun?
   c. Top what-Acc/why they are making noise Q why/what you are crying Q
   d. ‘Why are you making a noise?’
   e. ‘Why are you crying?’

However, there exist crucial differences between the WHAT-words and the WHY-words in both these languages.

Firstly, unlike WHY-words in these languages, WHAT-words indicate a high degree of emotion, such as surprise, annoyance, or anger (e.g., Och 2004). Therefore, in (2), WHAT-questions are best uttered in a situation where the speaker is annoyed or upset.

Secondly, it has been pointed out that Japanese nani-o must linearly precede the object in a transitive sentence as in (3) (e.g., Konno 2004). In this paper, I further report that Turkish reason WHAT-word ne also has an order restriction; and ne must appear right before the verb as in (4). On the other hand, WHY-words in these languages are not subject to the order restriction. To account for these properties of the reason WHAT-words in Japanese and Turkish, I propose (5).

(3) a. naze/nani-o hemma uta bakari utatte-i-ru no.
   b. naze nani-o hemma uta bakari naze/nani-o utatte-i-ru no.
   c. why/what Acc funny song only are singing Q funny song only why/what Acc are singing Q
   d. ‘Why are you singing only funny songs?’
   e. ‘Why are you knocking on the door?’

(4) a. Kapıya neden/ne calıyorsun?
   b. Neden/ne kapıya calıyorsun?
   c. why/what the door you are knocking Q why/what the door you are knocking Q
   d. ‘Why are you knocking on the door?’

(5) The WHAT-words in Japanese and Turkish obligatorily bear a [Foc]-F when they are used as reason wh-phrases. Recall that the reason WHAT-words generally imply speaker’s emotion such as anger or surprise. Thus, we assume the [Foc]-F in (5) to be a realization of this additional information, which is relevant to expressive contents in the sense of Potts (2003). Let us first consider Turkish ne, keeping in mind that languages use different means to encode focus including word order or morphology. Turkish has a specific focus position: the position immediately preceding the verb (Erguvanlı 1979). Given (5), it then naturally follows that Turkish reason WHAT-word ne always appears in the focus position as in (4). At this point, it is important to note that the WHY-word neden can also appear in that position as in (4a), because wh-phrases typically signal information that is unknown and thus it is natural for them to occur in the focus position. However, the significant difference between neden and ne is that other elements can appear in the focus position in a neden sentence as in (4b) because neden does not always have to bear the obligatory [Foc]-F. Accordingly, given that the [Foc]-F of ne is always realized by the particular focus position in Turkish, the strict order restriction of ne in (4) naturally follows.

As for Japanese nani-o, following Iida (2011), I assume here that a nani-o question always contains another phrase that bears a [Foc]-F in addition to nani-o. This is because a nani-o question becomes more acceptable when it contains an intensifier like sonnani ‘such a’, or when the object has a focus particle like bakari ‘only’ as in (3). Eventually, a nani-o sentence contains two phrases with a [Foc]-Fs: in (3a), nani-o and the object henna uta bakari. However, this configuration faces the intervention effect (IE), as depicted in (3a)'s base structure (6). There, the [Foc]-F of the object cannot establish the legitimate Agree relation with the Foc, due to the closer [Foc]-F. (Here, we assume that nani-o is base-generated in the VP-adjoined position (Och 1999) and that nani-o is accompanied by an empty wh Op(erator), which moves up to the CP (Watanabe 1992).)

(6) [CP [Foc [v pro [vP[Op nani-o] [vP henna uta bakari] utatte-i]]]ru-no]

To avoid this undesirable configuration (6), I adopt Iida’s (2011) derivations, in which nani-o is left-adjoined to the raised object with a [Foc]-F. This nani-o’s adjunction operation creates a focus cluster, and the Foc checks two [Foc]-Fs simultaneously as a whole cluster (e.g., Sabel and Wolfgang 2001). The derivations are illustrated in (7), and notice that the focus cluster has the desirable word order: nani-o precedes the object.

(7) a. [CP [Foc] [vP Op1 [vP henna uta bakari] [vP pro [vP t1 t2] utatte-i]]]ru-no]
   b. [CP OpP [vP t1 [vP t2] [vP henna uta bakari]] [vP pro [vP t3 t2] utatte-i]]ru-no]
A third similarity between nani-o and ne is that these reason WHAT-words cannot be used with the negation, unlike the WHY-word naze and neden. As Kurafuji (1996) points out with (8), Japanese nani-o induces ungrammaticality when the negation appears. In this paper, I report that, with the negation, Turkish ne only allows a rhetorical question reading, which, for example, suggests the hearer should beat the donkey in (9).

    they-Top what-Acc are clamoring-Neg Q they-Top why are clamoring-Neg Q
    ‘Why aren’t they clamoring?’ ‘Why aren’t they clamoring?’ (Kurafuji 1996: 87)

(9) Ne dövmıyorsun eşeg-i? 
    what you are not beating donkey-Acc
    * ‘Why aren’t you beating the donkey?’ [canonical question] 
    ‘Why don’t you beat the donkey?’ [rhetorical question]

As Kurafuji claims, the grammatical difference in (8) can be accounted for via the Inner Island Effect, with the assumption that naze is base-generated higher than the NegP, while nani-o is lower than the NegP. Our analysis, in fact, can correctly rule out (8a) because, as shown in (7), we assume nani-o to be base-generated in the VP-adjoining position and thus the Op-movement of nani-o eventually induces the Inner Island Effect, jumping over the NegP located under the TP. As for naze, we assume that it first appears in the [Spec, CP] (e.g., Ko 2005). It is worth noting here that this type of reasoning cannot be held by Nakao’s (2009: 244) structure in (10), where nani-o is base-generated in the F(func)ional)P(projection) in the CP area. Unlike our analysis, much more needs to be said to explain the fact in (8) to maintain this structure.

(10) [CP [FP nani-o [IP kare-wa [VP sawai] dei-ru ] F] no]
    what-Acc he-Top make noise Prog-Pres Q

Returning to Turkish examples in (9), the forced rhetorical reading of a ne sentence reminds us of the asymmetry between D(iscourse)-linked and non-D-linked wh-phrases, since only the latter are forced to have a rhetorical reading once the negation appears. To see this point, consider Endo’s (2007: 32) English examples below.

(11) a. Which professor didn’t you invite for the party? 
    b. ?? Who {the hell/in the world} didn’t you invite for the party? 

Although the D-linked wh-phrase which professor can jump over the negation to obtain a canonical wh-question reading in (11a), the aggressively non-D-linked wh-phrase who the hell/in the world cannot go over the negation in (11b). Thus, (11b) only gets rhetorical reading: i.e., only possible meaning is, for example, You invited everybody! (Endo 2007). Then, a natural conclusion here is that Turkish reason WHAT-word ne in (9) shows a property of non-D-linked wh-phrases. Furthermore, this conclusion amounts to saying that Turkish reason WHAT-word ne is base-generated in the lower position than the NegP, whereas the WHY-word neden is higher than the NegP. Therefore, we consequently obtained a similar hierarchical difference between the reason WHAT-words and the WHY-words in both Turkish and Japanese. This is desirable consequence to provide a unified analysis for reason wh-phrases in the two languages.

In fact, our unified analysis of reason wh-phrases can be supported further since Japanese nani-o shows non-D-linked properties just like Turkish ne. Nakao (2009) provides several similarities between a nani-o sentence and the English sentence that involves aggressively non-D-linked phrases such as wh-the-hell. For instance, as her examples below indicate, (i) neither of the sentences can be embedded in a veridical predicate as in (12); and (ii) in a multiple wh-question, no pair-list reading can be obtained as in (13).

    I-Top he-Nom what-Acc/why make noise Q know
    ‘I know why he makes a noise.’

(13) a. dare-ga nani-o naite-i-ru no. [Single Pair/Pair List] b. *Who the hell is in love with who?
    who-Nom what-Acc is crying Q [Single Pair/Pair List]
    ‘Who is crying why?’

Therefore, it can be concluded that ne and nani-o are similar in that they both have non-D-linked properties.

In sum, I report that the Turkish reason wh-phrase ne necessarily appears in the immediately preverbal position, which is the focus position in this language. Then, I propose that the Japanese nani-o and Turkish ne obligatorily bear the [Foc]-F, which correlates to additional information: i.e., speaker’s emotion. It is this [Foc]-F that makes (i) ne sit in the focus position and (ii) nani-o precede the object to avoid IE. Also I argue that both ne and nani-o have properties of non-D-linked phrases, since the former allows only a rhetorical reading if the negation appears, and the latter shows various similarities to the aggressively non-D-linked phrases in English. Furthermore, as a consequence, this paper argues that both Japanese and Turkish have a similar hierarchical difference between the reason WHAT-words and the WHY-words: the former is base-generated lower than the NegP; the latter higher than the NegP.